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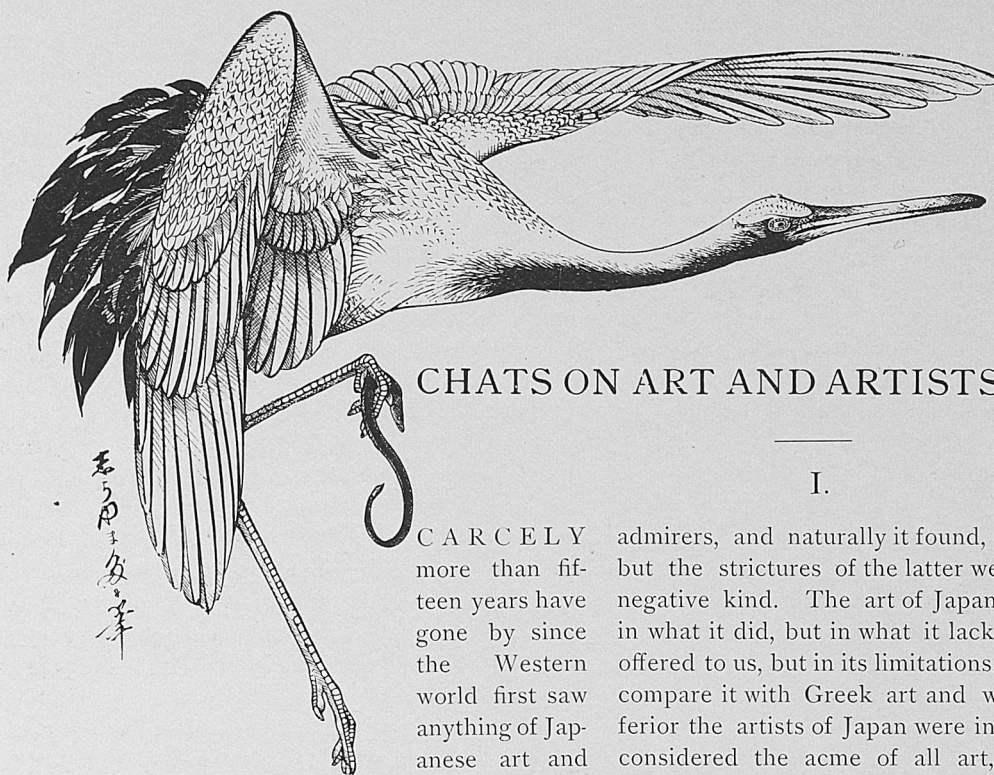
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CHATS ON ART AND ARTISTS IN JAPAN.

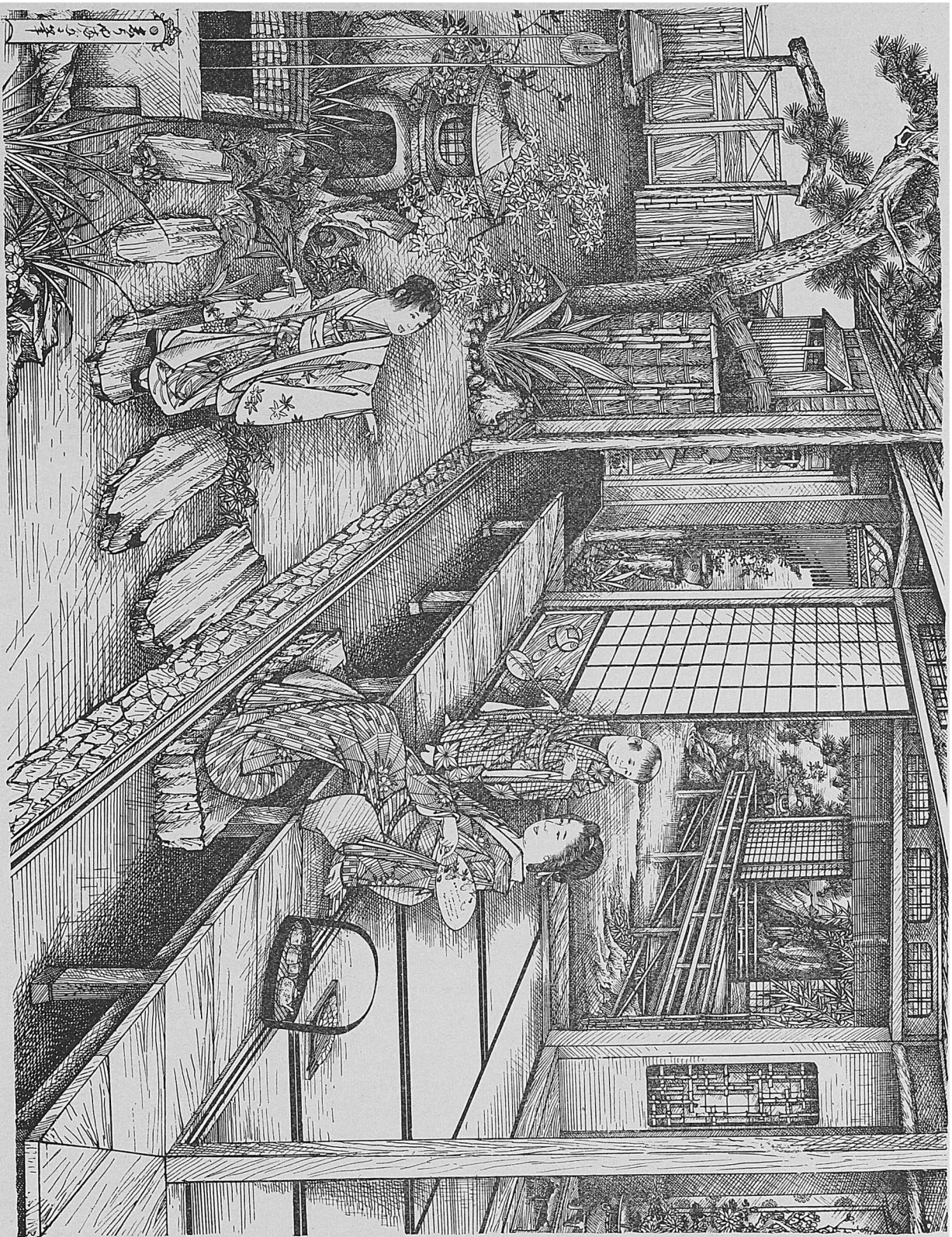
I.

was equally astonished and gratified at the wealth of originality, the insight into nature and the ability to reproduce its picturesque aspects, the depth of feeling and the hidden power which the new comer showed. In the short space of time which has since elapsed Japanese art has to a great extent revolutionized many departments of Occidental art and its genius has forced itself into all our surroundings. We see its influence in the sketches and drawings of some of our greatest artists, but we see it more especially and more prominently in all the applications of art to industry: In our silks and satins, in our porcelain and pottery, in our bronzes and metal goods, in the paper on our walls, in the carpets on our floors, in all interior decoration, nay, even in our stoves and fireplaces. Everywhere conventional bareness, crudity and ugliness have given place to a simple yet artistic, natural decoration, to a beautifying of form, design and external embellishment. It has even penetrated where, not so very long ago, such a change would have been thought by many to imply little short of impiety. The teachers and expounders of Calvin's stern faith, who for hundreds of years have taught us that this earth is a vale of tears, where brightness, gayety and joy are out of place and even sinful, do not now scruple to circulate invitations to their prayer-meetings decorated with those bright, beauteous and joyous scenes from nature with which Japanese artists appeal to and satisfy our longings for the beautiful.

The new school everywhere found enthusiastic

admirers, and naturally it found, also, harsh critics, but the strictures of the latter were altogether of a negative kind. The art of Japan was attacked not in what it did, but in what it lacked; not in what it offered to us, but in its limitations. We were told to compare it with Greek art and were shown how inferior the artists of Japan were in what was always considered the acme of all art, *i. e.*, the reproduction of the human form in its perfection. Then we were told that the next greatest art of Greece, architecture, was unknown in Japan, at least so far as building in marble, stone, or even brick, was concerned. We were further told that Japan was utterly deficient in oil painting, the great art of Mediæval Europe, and so the refrain went on as to the lack of other things, down to the American, who, when told by Professor Fenellosa that there were great masterpieces of painting in the old classic school of Japan, replied: "But the Japanese do not have any real pictures in gold frames, do they?" Perhaps it will not be amiss to say a few words in regard to these limitations of Japanese art, because incidentally it will throw into relief its more positive phases.

In ancient Hellas physical culture stood on a level with mental culture. The victor in the bodily exercises in the Olympian games was as highly honored and received the same applause that was accorded to the artist, the dramatist and the orator. For generations from father to son physical culture was encouraged until it developed those marvellous figures which Greek sculptors have immortalized in marble and stone. The human form in its perfection almost was constantly before their eyes, and its artistic reproduction was their great aim and object. This incitement was lacking altogether in Japan. Beauty and perfection of the human form were unappreciated. The greatest hero whom the country has produced, the Napoleon of Japan, a man who, in a land dominated by caste, raised himself from the lowest rank to be the virtual dictator of the



JAPANESE AT HOME.

Drawn by SHIRAYAMA DANI.

people, was a misshapen dwarf, with a face to match, and was nicknamed even during his lifetime Sarumatsu, or monkey face. At the same time dignity, force and power as expressed in the human face or in bearing and manner was fully appreciated and adequately rendered. This particular character of Japanese art is fully displayed pictorially in the great "Daibutsu," at Kamakura, a masterpiece quite worthy to stand side by side with anything of the kind produced in any age in any part of the world. A study of their pictorial art generally will also emphasize the fact that no attention or honor was ever paid to perfection, physical or ideal, of the naked human frame.

Architecture in stone, owing to the frequency and the severity of earthquakes, found no scope for development in Japan. It is possible and even probable, judging from what the people achieved in wood in the construction of their temples, that in later centuries they might perhaps have done something worthy the name of architecture in spite of these convulsions of nature; but the government, in its narrow, conservative, despotically-patriarchal way, stepped in and, to prevent loss of life, prohibited the erection of buildings more than two stories high. This put an end to all ambition and to all advancement in architecture. Perhaps in some similar way reasons might be adduced for the absence of anything like oil painting, for the lack of perspective in Japanese pictures, or for the disregard for it where it is evident such knowledge could not have been entirely wanting, and for other limitations of Japanese art. All such speculations, however, have only a negative value. It is of far more interest and probably more important to understand and to like Japanese art and Japan artists as they are and to consider the conditions and methods under which they have been developed.

Japanese art cannot be judged by comparison with the art of other lands; it cannot even be judged by the canons which we apply to art in the abstract. With us art is something entirely out of the common, to be idealized almost like genius, not one in a hundred having the faculty to create, and not one in ten, probably, being able to justly appreciate it. In Japan appreciation of artistic excellence, true, just and discriminating appreciation, is fully as common as, for instance, with us is the appreciation of mechanical superiority. There are fully as many persons in Japan able to judge correctly and judiciously of the artistic merits of a sketch, a picture or a carving as there can be found here to judge of a well-made table or a well-jointed piece of lumber, and the capability for creative art is there distributed in an equally great proportion. The best and highest expression of Japanese art is its true, loving, devoted interpretation of the picturesque side of

nature. All Japanese are close observers of nature, and therefore are all more or less good judges of the native art. How they came to be so devoted to nature and art a knowledge of their country and of their political and social conditions helps us materially to understand, and may almost be said wholly to solve the problem.

The conditions of life in Japan, while hardly such as to favor the material advance and greatness of the nation, were preëminently favorable to artistic tendencies and developments. For hundreds of years Japan was virtually governed by an oligarchy of which, in a much milder way, Venice in its palmiest days might be taken as a prototype. Everything was governed by a system unchanging and unvarying, compared to which the laws of the Medes and Persians were as fickle as a girl's whims. The Mikado was the nominal head of the government, but as early as the eleventh century he was dispossessed by a military chieftain, who made himself Shogoon, or "Taikun," as foreigners call it. The Shogoons themselves soon became figure-heads in the hands of their Councillors. The Councillors again had to yield obedience to the Goroju, the great council of state composed of five members of the highest families. The Goroju only too generally was composed of utterly incompetent men, figure-heads again, moving unconsciously at the will of subordinates whose names were hardly known to their contemporaries. Thus the central power at Kyoto, the court of the Mikado, and Yedo, the court of the Shogoon, was organized. The country itself was divided into 272 *daimiates* (principalities or dukedoms) governed by the Daimio, who was the hereditary, and was recognized and supposed to be the absolute ruler of his fiefdom. But each Daimio had at his capital two Councillors sent out by the Yedo government to assist him with their advice. The position of these Councillors was very similar to that of the British Residents at the court of the Indian Rajahs, only that they had greater secret powers. They were changed very frequently so as to prevent anything like friendship or intimacy springing up between them and the Daimios to whose courts they were thus accredited. Moreover, they knew that they were watched; their secretary, the merchant who supplied them, or even one of their servants, might be a secret agent to compass their downfall and to cause them to be severely punished. A consummate system of espionage pervaded all ranks and conditions of life. Political genius, however great it might be, was utterly powerless to enable its possessor to make any headway against such a system. Gradually innovation became impossible, not only in politics but in every other department of the social state. All change was looked upon as a harbinger of revolution.

Scientists, mechanics and laborers in any field were compelled to move in the beaten tracks laid down by law, custom and etiquette. Every innovation subjected him who proposed or executed it to imprisonment and generally death.

Those highest in position suffered most from this stagnant conservatism. The poor Daimios could not even find relief in the circle of their families, for their wives and children were obliged to live in their palaces at Yedo, whither the husband could only come once every year on a visit, the length of which was always duly ordered. The only refuge left to the cultivated mind was art, and to art it fled as a relief, as a safety valve against inaction. Those high in position and nominal authority would resign their places long before they reached manhood, often when they were hardly beyond the period of their youth, in favor of their sons, who, in many cases, were infants one or two years old. When there was no son the law sanctioned adoption, and adoption in such cases became universal. The baby Prince ruled through a regency of Councillors, while the father retired to a life of *Inkio*, of retirement from worldly affairs, of contemplation, artistic pursuits and

communing with nature. And where is there such another country as Japan for such a life? None can compare in universal beauty with the land of the Rising Sun. It is hilly and mountainous throughout. Scenes of rugged, awe-inspiring grandeur although not absent are comparatively rare, but throughout the length and breadth of the land there is no spot that is not beautiful, and the traveller cannot go ten miles in any direction without coming upon scenes of extreme loveliness. Calm, gentle repose is the leading characteristic. Nature invites us to throw aside ambition, to repress restless energy and fierce desires, and to imitate her in her quiet. And the men living there followed this counsel.

Drawing, painting, music, composing verses, making and decorating pottery and porcelain and bronzes, forging swords—these were the pursuits to which by far the greater part of those born to rule were devoted before they reached man's estate. To the full extent of their means they gathered around them artists and men of artistic impulses. In every part of the kingdom such art centres existed until the whole nation became imbued with a deep love, appreciation and almost reverence for art.

